

## Notes on Romans 4

This is a synopsis with minor modifications and additions of the relevant section of NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*: New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002).

### 2. Abraham's covenant family 4.1-25

Once we recognize the main subject 3.21–4.25 and its place in Paul's larger argument, Rm 4 comes into focus:

*Rm 4 is a full-dress exposition of the covenant God made with Abraham in Gn 15, showing at every point how God always intended and promised that the covenant family of Abraham would include Gentiles as well as Jews.*

This is Paul's main topic. Rm 4 does not, as often thought, provide an 'example' or 'proof from scripture' of the 'thesis' of justification by faith that Paul has presented in 3.21–31. 'Justification by faith' is part of his point, but Paul is much more concerned to show what God's promise and covenant are.

After 3.21–31, Paul asks whether, 'therefore' (*oun*), covenant membership for Gentiles means belonging to Abraham's *physical* family— 'Have we found that Abraham is our father according to the flesh?' (4.1).<sup>1,2</sup>

Paul is not primarily asking how someone becomes a Christian, or whether religious rituals like circumcision or baptism, which some Evangelicals deem to be (useless) 'works'. Paul is actually asking what distinguishes Abraham's family? who are his children according to God's promise? ethnic Jews only, or all who believe in 'the God who gives life to the dead' (4.17,24).

In answer, he will refer seven times<sup>3</sup> to Gn 15.6— 'Abraham *believed* God, and it was reckoned to him as right-

eousness'— as he makes three main points: neither works (4.2–8), nor circumcision (4.9–12), nor Torah (4.13–15) are what God counts for 'righteousness' (*dikaïosynē*), i.e., for membership in the family he promised, or in the covenant he gave to Abraham. Rather, God counts people as covenant members on the basis of their faith, even if they are without works, circumcision, or Torah.

Rm 4.16–17 then answers the question of 4.1 directly:<sup>4</sup> Abraham is indeed the 'father' of God's whole promised people ('all the seed'), 'not only for that which is of the Torah, but for that also which is of Abraham's faith' (4.16b). He is the father of both Gentiles and Jews alike, who believe in 'the God who gives life to the dead' (4.17), or 'who raised Jesus from the dead' (4.24).

It's important to remind ourselves over and over that Paul's term of choice here— 'righteousness' (or: 'justification'; Gr *dikaïosynē*, Heb *ṣedaqah*)— does not mean a moral quality but the status of being *vindicated* in a covenant lawsuit (the *prevailing* party, whether plaintiff or defendant); hence the status of being found *at right within the covenant*; and hence of being a *full covenant member after all*.

To 'circumcise the flesh' was the 'sign of covenant membership' that God gave Abraham in Gn 17.11; Paul calls this 'sign' a 'seal of the *righteousness of faith*' (4.11a). The 'righteousness of faith', in other words, is equivalent to the status of 'covenant membership' that Abraham had when God reckoned his faith as 'righteousness'. The uncircumcised, whose faith is like Abraham's, will have the same 'righteousness' (covenant status) reckoned to them as well (4.11b), for covenant membership did not depend on the circumcision that was its sign, but on the faith that God accepted. 'Have we found that Abraham is our

<sup>1</sup> KJV has 'What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?' Other translations are similar. But the Greek does not really support this reading, and commentators have struggled endlessly with it. See the discussion below at 4.1 for the criticism and for the rationale of the translation given here.

<sup>2</sup> Galatians asks the same question, but from a different angle.

<sup>3</sup> Rm 4.3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 13, 18–22, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Most commentators, oblivious to Paul's actual argument, take this *climactic* verse to be an 'aside'!

father in the flesh?’ (4.1). The answer is No. Faith is the one and only basis of covenant membership, and that all who share it are ‘justified’, that is, reckoned as covenant members, just as Abraham was.

Paul then talks about the nature of that faith itself (4.18-25). It’s not just a general ‘believingness’, but rather, a trust specifically in ‘God who gives life to the dead, and calls those things that are not as though they were’ (4.17). This is the basis on which God made Abraham the ‘father of many nations’ (4.18; cf Gn 17.4-5), despite the fact that both he and Sarah were old enough to be as good as dead and well beyond childbearing.

Abraham’s faith was the reversal of the rebellion and idolatry of fallen Adamic humanity (4.19-22). This passage will correspond in numerous points to Paul’s earlier exposition of ‘human idolatry and injustice’ (1.18ff), including, among other things, Paul’s seemingly contextless reference to same-sex practices there. As it turns out, the ‘reward’ (*misthos*) of a ‘seed’ or family in whom the world would be set right, which God gave to Abraham, contrasts with the ‘reward’ (*antimisthian*) of the ‘passions of dishonor’ to which God has ‘handed over’ the rebellious (1.26-27).

For those who trust in the God ‘who raised Jesus from the dead’ (4.24), God reckons faith as covenant membership. Jesus’ death has dealt with the sin described in the first three chapters, and his resurrection unveils the ultimate vindication of God’s faithful by showing it already at work in his ‘son’ (1.4). Jesus’ death was God’s victory over sin, and our faith in ‘the God who gives life to the dead’ (4.17), or the God ‘who raised Jesus from the dead’ (4.24) is the basis for our membership in his true people (4.25).

A christological formula in 4.25 rounds off the whole first part (Rm 1–4) of Paul’s letter to the Romans, and sums up everything so far. By alluding to Isa 53 in 4.25, Paul again makes the point that runs through most of Rm 1–4: Jesus has done what Israel was called to do (be light of the world) (cf 2.17-23). Unlike faithless Israel (2.21-24), the Messiah’s faithful obedience (as Paul will call it in 5.12-21) reveals God’s own covenant faithfulness or saving justice. And the Messiah’s ‘handing over’ (4.25) resolves at last the repeated ‘handing over’ of sinners to their own foolish practices (1.24,26,28). All of this prepares both for the development of the argument in Rm 5–8 about the nature of our deliverance, and the relation of Jews and Gentiles in the church, in Rm 9–11.

The structure of Rm 4 is thus as follows:

‘If Abraham is our father, must we become Jews?’	4.1
No—	4.2-15

Not by Torah works	4.2-8
Not by circumcision	4.9-12
Not by Torah itself	4.13-15
Abraham is father of the promised family, both Jews and Gentiles, by faith	4.16-17
Faith is the basis of covenant membership	4.18-25
Abraham’s faith in him who gives life to the dead	4.18-19
The stance of the true humanity before God (vs 1.18-32)	4.20-22
Our faith in him who raised Jesus from the dead	4.23-24
The Messiah, handed over, justifies those who were ‘handed over’ to Sin (1.24,26,28)	4.25

Why does Paul mount such a complex argument about Abraham and his family? Paul’s whole theme in Romans is God’s saving, covenant-faithful justice by which the world is both condemned and rescued. He presents Abraham’s story to show what God promised from the beginning. In raising the Messiah, he has fulfilled his promise to Abraham by creating a family whose defining mark is faith in him as the giver of life. We need to appreciate how very specific this is!

**a. If Abraham is our father, must we become Jews? 4.1**

‘What then shall we say? Have we found Abraham to be our father according to the flesh?’ This is not, of course, what any of the commentaries or translations say.<sup>5</sup> Among the reasons we should prefer it, though, three stand out:

- First, it introduces the chapter Paul actually wrote, as opposed to one that he ‘should’ have written. He is actually concerned with the scope and nature of Abraham’s family, rather than with ‘justification by faith’ as a doctrine about how people get ‘saved’.
- Second, when Paul introduces an argument with ‘what then shall we say?’ (*ti oun eroumen*), this phrase is normally complete in itself, requiring a question mark at once. (There is, of course, no punctuation in the earliest mss.) Compare 6.1; 7.7; also ‘what then’ (*ti oun*) in 3.9.
- Third, it avoids the awkwardness of the usual readings where Abraham is the subject of ‘to have

<sup>5</sup> See RB Hays, ‘Have We Found Abraham to Be Our Father According to the Flesh?’ A Reconsideration of Rom. 4.1’, *NovT* 27 (1985) 76-98. See also RB Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 54-55.

found' (*heurekaenai*). Since it's not clear what 'Abraham has found' would even mean in the context of what Paul has been talking about, one has to force the verb to say something like 'was gained by' (NRSV) or 'discovered' (NIV), neither of which lead, in any case, to what Paul is actually going to say.

*So please correct your bible, so that it reads, 'What then shall we say? Have we found Abraham to be our father according to the flesh?' at 4.1.*

Paul raises this question as a possible conclusion that could be drawn from what he has said so far, in order to argue against it. 'Have we [followers of the Messiah] found that Abraham is our father in the flesh?' Do we find (note how the word 'find' suddenly makes perfect sense) that we are members of Abraham's fleshly family? In other words, if in the Messiah, God has been true to the covenant with Abraham, might that not mean, as the Galatians had been led to believe, that members of the Messiah-family in fact belong to Abraham's fleshly family, and are therefore obliged to circumcise and keep the Torah? After all, God did say to Abraham, 'You shall be circumcised in the flesh' (Gn 17.11). When we read Rm 4 with this question in mind, it makes perfect sense.

#### 1. Not by Torah works 4.2-8

Those who argue that Paul was attacking a theology of self-help legalism, in which 'righteousness' is earned by moral effort, regularly appeal to 4.2-8 for support. Out of context, these verses might indeed bear that sense. But within the present argument they just expand Paul's point; they are not its inner substance.

Paul's main argument is that 'works' (i.e., of Torah) were not the reason for Abraham's justification; and the idea of 'working' is then expanded metaphorically in 4.4-5 into the idea of doing a job for which one earns wages. The critical connection is established with 'for' or 'because' (*gar*) at the start of 4.2,<sup>6</sup> and it depends on the link between 'works of Torah' and 'Jews only' that Paul has established in the immediately preceding verses. If Abraham's covenant membership was defined in terms of 'works of Torah' (4.2a), then since Torah is the possession of Abraham's ethnic family, he and his family could boast on the basis of ethnicity, and (4.1) any Gentiles wanting to belong to his family would have to join the Jewish tribe, with the males among them getting circumcised.

Paul's response, to be filled out as usual in what follows, is brusque: If Abraham's covenant membership was defined in terms of 'works', then 'he has a boast— but not toward God' (4.2b). Paul then says what is true 'before

God', to cut the ground from under any potential ethnic boast, and to establish once and for all the non-ethnic nature of Abraham's true family, on the basis of the original covenant itself.

By way of explanation (*gar*, 'for' or 'because', again omitted by NIV), Paul quotes Gn 15.6: 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'. The word 'reckoned' is a bookkeeping metaphor, meaning to add something up. The Greek construction is rare, though ('to credit something to someone *unto* something'), and the precise meaning Paul intends must be sought principally in the Genesis account itself on the one hand and in the rest of Rm 4 on the other.<sup>7</sup>

Gn 15 opens with Abraham's puzzlement. Yhwh has promised a great inheritance to him, but he has no children. Who then will inherit? God promises a family as numerous as the stars in heaven. Abraham 'believes' this, and God 'reckons' Abraham's belief 'to him [as] righteousness'. The passage then at once speaks of God's further promise, echoing Gn 12, to give Abraham the land of Canaan as his inheritance. Abraham asks how he may know. God commands him to prepare a covenant ceremony; he does; and God solemnly tells him that his seed will languish as slaves in a foreign country, but that God will bring them out and give them the land. The whole chapter, of which the covenant ceremony forms the climax, is thus all about Abraham's promised seed and the route by which they will come to their assured inheritance. Within this context, the key statement of 15.6, cryptic and almost unparalleled, appears to refer forward to the covenant ceremony about to take place. Its overall meaning must then be something like: 'God counted Abraham's faith as acceptable for covenant membership'; and 'Abraham's believing the promise was accounted by God as the reason Abraham was to be upheld as far as his question went'.

So there are three levels of meaning in the phrase as Paul quotes it in 4.3:

- Bookkeeping ('reckoned'): God made an entry in Abraham's ledger, writing 'faith', or more specifically 'faith in this promise', in the column marked 'righteousness' (i.e., 'covenant membership').
- Law-court: As judge, God declares that Abraham's faith in this promise is the sign that he is in the right in a covenant law-court. We should be careful not to assume, with normal English usage, that (a) 'righteousness' means 'moral goodness', and that (b) 'faith' is then either a form of, or a substitute

<sup>6</sup> 'In fact' is NIV's loose way of making the same point.

<sup>7</sup> The only other occurrences, Ps 106.31 and 4QMMT C 31 mostly just restate the problem.

for, such moral goodness. When Abraham's faith is 'accounted as righteousness', it means that his faith is the sure sign that he has been vindicated.

- Covenant membership (and on 'righteousness' and 'covenant', see at 4.11). This is the deepest level, which dominates the chapter: Abraham's faith was the sure sign that he was in partnership with God; and God sealed this with the covenant ceremony and detailed promises about Abraham's seed and inheritance. Both these themes play an important role in later parts of the chapter and the letter.

Paul does not mean that God was looking for a particular type of moral goodness (a 'righteousness') that would earn people membership in the covenant, and that, failing to find this, was prepared to accept faith as a substitute. Faith, for Paul, is not a 'substitute' qualification because *it is not a qualification at all*, nor is 'righteousness' the same thing as moral goodness.

*'Righteousness', when applied to humans, is, at bottom, the status of having been vindicated as a covenant member; 'faith' is the sign that reveals that status because it is its key symptom.*

Once that is grasped, the way is open not just for the rest of Paul's argument in the present passage to unfold smoothly, but also for the nuances carried by faith and the Torah later in the letter to be understood as well.

By way of showing what he means in 4.3, Paul develops the bookkeeping metaphor in the direction of employment and wage-earning. This is the only time he uses this metaphorical field in all his discussions of justification, so we should not take it as dominant, as in much post-Reformation discussion. Rm 4.4 indicates the metaphorical situation that might have obtained if Abraham had after all been justified by works; 4.5, by contrast, shows the true position. Through this contrast, Paul is able to build into his developing picture two further important elements: God's declaration of justification is a matter of grace (4.4), and it has to do with God's justifying the *ungodly* (4.5).

The danger is to suppose that 4.5 is a straightforward reversal of 4.4: workers get paid not by grace but by debt, but believers get paid not by debt but by grace. The two sentences are not in fact balanced, partly because Paul pulls himself out of the bookkeeping metaphor halfway through 4.5 and returns to the law-court and the covenant. So 4.5 not only contrasts with 4.4 ('working' and 'not working'), but also deconstructs the whole frame of thought: The alternative to 'working' is to 'trust the one who justifies the ungodly'.

Nothing so far has prepared us for the description of Abraham himself as 'ungodly', though. In the Genesis story he has already obeyed God's call (Gn 12) and, though moments of apparent disobedience are part of the story (calling Sarah his sister rather than his wife, Gn 12.10-20; 20.1-18), he appears for the most part to be worshipping and obeying God. But Paul is presumably thinking of Abraham's whole story, including his background in pagan Ur before Yhwh's call and covenant. Jewish tradition tended to regard Abraham as the first to protest against idolatry and to worship the one true God instead.<sup>8</sup> Paul does not entirely dissent from this, but as he will show in the rest of the chapter, that still makes him the father quite specifically of Gentiles who come to faith, not merely of Jews. This is, in fact, the beginning of a daring theme: that Abraham is actually *more like* believing Gentiles than he is like believing Jews.

But God's action in justifying the ungodly is what, according to Scripture, a just judge should *not* do. Ex 23.7 declares, in words Paul echoes, 'you shall not justify the ungodly'; and Pr 17.15 declares that those who justify the unjust, or condemn the righteous, are alike an abomination.<sup>9</sup> When Paul says God 'justifies the ungodly' (4.5), the only possible grounds are the propitiation of 3.25. What is unjust in the human law-court is contained within a higher, covenant justice, reminding us again that, just as the bookkeeping metaphor is not Paul's basic point, so law too does not reach to the heart of what he is saying. What matters is the covenant, established by God with Abraham while he was still 'ungodly', and now extended by sheer grace to any and all who, despite their ungodliness, trust in this same God. The covenant was always intended to be God's means of putting the world right; the key moment in this promised accomplishment comes when, because of the unveiling of God's righteousness in the death of Jesus, God not only can but must declare the ungodly to be in the right, that is, as within the covenant. Paul is here preparing for the climax of the chapter, in which he defines faith as belief in 'the God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead' (4.24). Throughout the passage, in fact, Paul is wrestling not simply with the question of Abraham's faith, but with the question of God's character and identity. He insists on seeing these in the light both of Abraham and the covenant and of the events concerning Jesus.

Third, the word 'ungodly' (*asebē*, 4.5) takes us right back to the start of Paul's description of human idolatry (*asebeia*) and injustice in 1.18. That Abraham's story will

<sup>8</sup> See L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*. 7 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 1.186-217.

<sup>9</sup> Cf too Dt 16.19; 27.25; Pr 17.26; Ez 22.12; Susanna 53.

prove to be the solution for the whole problem of human sin (1.18–3.20) will become clear in 4.18–22.

One who believes in Abraham's God, therefore, will find that faith is not a meritorious spiritual act (how could the 'ungodly' perform acts of spiritual merit?), but the sign of a covenant membership given by God in sheer grace.

In 4.6–8, Paul calls a second witness. At one level he chooses David because the key word 'reckon' appears in Ps 32.2 (31.2 LXX), which he will quote; and on another level, the multiple references to sin enable him, to glance back to 1.18–3.20 yet again. David, the forgiven sinner, is mentioned not just as an *example* but as part of covenant *history*, in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>10</sup> There, however, his forgiveness stems from his observance of Torah; the implication being that if you keep the Torah, you too will be forgiven. For Paul, though, it is purely a matter of *God* not reckoning sins; nothing in the psalm, or in Paul's comment on it, implies that David could claim forgiveness on any grounds whatever. It was free and undeserved. David 'pronounces the blessing on the person to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works' (4.6). Since the psalm goes on to speak of the *forgiven* as 'the righteous' (Ps 32.11), 'righteous' clearly doesn't mean 'morally perfect', and Paul can assume that 'reckoning righteousness apart from works' and 'not reckoning sin against someone' are equivalent.

Paul has now laid the foundation for the specific point he wants to make, namely that Gentiles are welcome in the covenant family on the basis of faith and faith alone, without works and without any of the signs of Jewish membership— indeed, there is an appropriateness to this, precisely because of the condition Abraham was in when God called him and established the covenant. He was, ungodly, uncircumcised, and had not received the Torah, but God reckoned his faith as righteousness (Gn 15.6).

## 2. Not by circumcision 4.9–12

In 4.9–12, Paul repeats, in sharper form, the question of 4.1, in order to address it head-on in the light of 4.2–8. Does all he has said about Abraham and David apply only to the circumcised? And therefore, should Gentile Christians get circumcised, if they want to inherit the covenant blessings, including forgiveness of sins? Is what he said in 2.25–29 and 3.30 about the new family, composed of uncircumcised and circumcised alike, contradicted by the story of Abraham and the terms of the original covenant? No; beginning again from Gn 15.6, Paul shows that, because Abraham was not circumcised until Gn 17, his being accounted righteous took place

before he was circumcised (4.10). In other words, in Gn 15, *Abraham was an uncircumcised member of the covenant*.

But the main point is not the method or timing of Abraham's justification— rather, it is that uncircumcised believers are every bit as 'justified' as Abraham (4.11b). Indeed, 4.11b–12 seem to imply almost that uncircumcised believers are *more* obviously Abraham's children, and that the circumcised arrive on their coattails— and even then, not on the basis of their circumcision, but on the basis of their following in the footsteps of Abraham's 'uncircumcised faith' (4.12b). Paul is almost reversing the sequence of 1.16, and saying, 'To the Gentile believer first and also to the Jewish believer'. Gentile believers don't need to discover Abraham as their father in the flesh— that is, get circumcised— but Jews need to discover Abraham as their uncircumcised father by sharing his faith. They need not remove the marks of their circumcision, since both circumcision and uncircumcision are irrelevant to covenant membership (cf. 1Co 7.18–20).

In case of any suggestion (as in 3.1) that circumcision is a bad thing, Paul gives it a place of honor in 4.11a. It was a 'sign or seal' of the 'righteousness' that was Abraham's on the basis of the faith he had while still uncircumcised. Paul does not say here, as he does in Ga 3, that the covenant of circumcision with Abraham's ethnic family, and for that matter the territorial covenant concerning one piece of land, was designed by God as a temporary staging-post on the way to the time when, with the coming of the Messiah and the universal availability of Abrahamic faith, all nations and all lands would be claimed by God's grace.<sup>11</sup> But his thought here is not far off. By designating circumcision as a sign or seal of Abraham's status of faith-demarkated righteousness, Paul reclaims it rather than renouncing it: Faith is the indication of covenant membership, and circumcision was supposed to be a sign of that status. The implication is that to use circumcision as a pointer to a status 'according to the flesh' is to abuse the sign. This too is, then, part of Paul's developing answer to the question of 4.1.

In Gn 17.11, God says, 'You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin. It will be a sign of the covenant between me and you'. In referring to this verse in 4.11,13 Paul writes 'seal of righteousness' for 'sign of the covenant'. In other words, he sees 'righteousness' and 'covenant', or more precisely, 'covenant membership' as equivalent terms. So, here in 4.11, Abraham 'received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the *covenant membership* ('righteousness') *of faith* that he had while still uncircumcised'.

<sup>10</sup> 4QMMT (C 25–26).

<sup>11</sup> See Wright, *Climax*, chap. 8.

Paul may be thinking of baptism at this point, as a Christian version of circumcision— a seal of the *'covenant membership of faith'*, a seal of the status that people have in the Messiah, by the Spirit, whose ongoing sign is faith. At any rate, he seldom uses the word 'sign' or 'seal' except in baptismal contexts (2Co 1.22; Ep 1.13; 4.30), and in Col 2.11-12, baptism in some ways at least plays the same role in the Christian covenant that circumcision played within the Jewish one. This prepares for Rm 6, where we will pursue the point further (see also on 4.13 below).

So the argument has been developing step by step. First step: Does the faith family have to regard Abraham as its physical father? No. Abraham was justified freely, by grace, without works, as was the sinful David; and this faith was precisely faith in the God who justifies the 'ungodly', i.e., Gentile idolaters, outsiders. Second step: Abraham was justified while uncircumcised, establishing the pattern for other uncircumcised people also to be justified. 'That righteousness might be reckoned to them also' (4.11b) anticipates the conclusion: 'that we also will have righteousness reckoned to us, who believe in him who raised Jesus' (4.24).

In all of this, Abraham has not been just an example. Paul has been arguing for who God is and who God's people are. He's showing what God has been up to, and expounding *how* he's been faithful to his promise.

### 3. Not by the Torah itself 4.13-15

Rm 4.13-15 does not introduce a new topic; it explains (*gar*, 'for' or 'because') what has just been said.<sup>12</sup> Paul is not just listing 'circumcision' and 'Torah' as different kinds of 'works', but mounting a sustained argument about the nature of Abraham's promised family. He has now reached the point he's had in mind ever since he said that God's saving justice was revealed 'without the Torah' (3.21): Torah itself cannot be the boundary marker of the covenant family. Translating *nomos* as 'law' throughout these verses obscures Paul's focus on the Torah as Israel's *boundary marker*, so this is one place again where you'll have to correct your bible. NRSV keeps the definite article (*'the law'*) throughout, but by not capitalizing 'law', it still obscures Paul's point. Circumcision is neither necessary nor sufficient for membership in this family. Torah is not the basis of membership; and in fact Paul has already shown that the Torah actually condemns those who possess it. Torah brings about wrath (4.15a, referring back to 3.19-20, and behind that 2.12b). If the divine promise is to be fulfilled, it must

be in a realm apart from Torah (4.15b, referring back to 3.21). That's the thrust of these verses.

Into this dense statement, though, Paul has built hints of other points to be developed as his argument progresses. First, he reads the geographical promises of Gn 15 in terms of God's intention that Abraham's 'seed' would inherit, not one territory merely, but the whole world (*kosmos*). One strand in Second Temple Jewish thought developed Gn 12.3, 18.18, and 22.18 (all nations blessed in Abraham) through the prophetic promises that Israel would be a light to the nations, the ruler of the nations, etc.,<sup>13</sup> the Psalms' visions of the Messiah's worldwide dominion,<sup>14</sup> and the post-biblical thought of Si 44.21 (which brings together Gn 12.3 and Ps 72.8) and *Jubilees* 19.21 (where Jacob's family in the same terms as Abraham's) towards an idea of Israel's eventual *military and political dominion*, but that is not Paul's vision at all. Another destination of this trend is 2Bar 14.13; 51.3, where the promised inheritance is a *new world entirely*, distinct from the present one; this is not Paul's view either (see at 8.18-27). Paul's views are distinctive.

In Paul's thought, ethnic, national Israel will not rule the world, nor would God make a new one; rather, God will rule the world through the Messiah Jesus, so as to bring all nations equally into God's family (see 9.5; 10.13). Paul's development of the 'inheritance' theme, of Gn 15 and elsewhere in the Pentateuch, here takes a decisive turn that looks ahead to 8.12-30.<sup>15</sup>

The point of 4.13 is that the inheritance promised repeatedly in Genesis was not to be given to Abraham's seed<sup>16</sup> on the basis of Torah. This is then explained (*gar*) in 4.14: If 'those from the Torah'— ethnic Jews— were the heirs, then nobody at all would inherit. This would make faith useless (whether of Abraham or of anyone trying to copy him) and would nullify the promise, since God would ultimately be giving Abraham neither seed nor inheritance.

Why? Paul's explanation is terse: 'the Torah brings about wrath' (4.15a). Putting this together with 3.19-20, we see why: (a) Torah shows up sin within ethnic Israel; (b) sin invokes wrath. Therefore (c) if the inheritance were confined to ethnic Israel, (d) nobody at all would inherit. Those outside would be kept there; those inside would be subject to God's wrath.<sup>17</sup> This does not cast a slur

<sup>12</sup> And NIV yet again omits the *gar*.

<sup>13</sup> Isa 11.10-14; 42.1, 6; 49.6; 54.3; 65.16; Jr 4.2; Zc 9.10.

<sup>14</sup> Ps 72.8-11, cf. Ex 23.31; 1Kg 4.21,24.

<sup>15</sup> See Wright, 'New Exodus'.

<sup>16</sup> NRSV translates *sperma* as 'descendants'; NIV as 'offspring'; but 'seed' (an important biblical word) is what Paul says.

<sup>17</sup> Paul makes a similar point in Ga 3.15-22: God promised Abraham a *single* 'seed' (family), and since Torah divides the world into two (Jews

upon Torah; Torah is simply doing its job, and Paul affirms that it is right to do so. He does not yet address the question, raised by the similar argument in Galatians, as to why God would give the Torah (Ga 3.19); he will deal with that in Rm 7, having allowed the problem to build up further through similar hints in Rm 5 and 6.

The other hint of the wider theological scheme is 4.15b: 'Where there is no Torah, there is no transgression'. In view of his entire earlier argument, Paul can scarcely mean by this that Gentiles, being outside the Torah, are *guiltless*— he has, after all, described 'all the idolatry and injustice of men' in 1.18-32. But before God gave the Torah, there was no explicit disobedience to a specific commandment given by God.

This prepares us for the climax of the chapter. The covenant is fulfilled in the creation of a worldwide family marked out by Abraham-like faith.

**b. Abraham is father of the  
promised family, both Jews  
and Gentiles, by faith 4.16**

The main sentence of Paul's final point has neither verbs, subjects nor objects. Paul is hurrying on to the main point of the whole chapter. Literally, he starts out, 'Therefore out of faith, so that by grace...'. We have to supply the missing words: 'Therefore [Abraham is our father] out of faith, that [covenant membership might be] according to grace'— and Paul continues, 'so that the promise might be valid for all the seed, not only for the one from the Torah but also for the one from Abraham's faith' (4.16). Paul is now giving the full answer to the question he asked in 4.1, which is why he begins, 'therefore' (*dia touto*), or rather, 'thus it comes about that...'. (cf. 5.12; 2Co 4.1). The universal availability of the promise is Paul's main thrust, and he backs it up at once with an explanation that specifically answers 4.1: Abraham is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations' (4.17a).

This in turn is backed up in with the great statement of the other main theme of the chapter, the character of the God in whom Abraham believed. Just as Paul answered his own hypothetical suggestion in 4.2a of what is *not* the case with the brusque remark 'but not toward God' (4.2b), so now he backs up his statement of what in fact *is* the case (4.17a) with 'in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist' (4.17b).

Faith, grace, and promise, then, are vital to this chapter, but they are not its main subjects. The main subjects are

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and Gentiles) it can't stand against the promise. But coming later than the promise, Torah can't annul it. See Wright, *Climax*, chap. 8.

Abraham, his family, and his God. This is what we would expect if the subject of the larger section is indeed the revelation of God's covenant faithfulness and the creation of a Jew-plus-Gentile family. But especially since the Reformation, people have often read them exactly the other way round, so that (for example) the NRSV brackets out the *key statement(!)* in 4.16b-17a.<sup>18</sup> When phrases and sentences do not fit, we should take it as a sign that the passage has been forced in the wrong direction. Rm 4 is not a 'proof from scripture' of 'justification by faith', into which Paul has inserted some remarks about the fatherhood of Abraham and the character of God; it is an exposition of the covenant God, his covenant promises to Abraham, and how he fulfilled them, with justification and faith playing their part within the overall argument.

In particular, the passage makes explicit something about God unveiled (at least to Paul's Christian hindsight) in Gn 15, something Paul will use brilliantly to bring his discourse round to where he wants it to be at the end of the chapter. God is the God who gives life to the dead— something the pagan gods did not even claim to do— and calls into existence things that do not exist. This is, of course, a characteristically Jewish view of the one true God, the creator and life-giver (cf. Ws 16.13; Tob 13.2; 2Bar 48.8; belief in God's giving life to the dead is expressed in the second of the Eighteen Benedictions, part of Jewish daily prayer); and it corresponds, within the present argument, to the description of God in 4.5 as 'the God who justifies the ungodly'.

Within this overall statement, there is one slightly puzzling note. In 4.16 Paul Abraham's entire multiethnic family 'the whole seed'<sup>19</sup>— 'not the one from the Torah only, but also the one from Abraham's faith'. By itself, this might imply that Jews who kept Torah formed one part of the family, while Gentiles who, shared Abraham's faith, though not having Torah, formed the other. This is ruled out by everything Paul has said from 3.19 to the present point, though. 'The one from the Torah' is simply here a shorthand for 'the Jew'; and Paul has already insisted in 4.12 that Jewish ancestry, signaled by circumcision, is of value only if the person concerned follows in the steps of Abraham's *faith* (cf. 2.25-29; 10.1-13; 11.23).

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<sup>18</sup> KJV and JB simply bracket 4.17a; the RSV begins the parenthesis after 'to all his descendants'.

<sup>19</sup> For 'seed' as 'family', see Wright, *Climax*, 162-68, comparing the present passage with Ga 3.15-18. See also at 9.6-8.

**3. Faith is the basis of covenant membership 4.17-25**

**a. Abraham's faith in him who gives life to the dead 4.17-18**

Paul doesn't just say that Abraham trusted God generally, but trusted 'God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were' (4.17). When he finishes his argument, he will explicitly call this faith 'believing in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead' (4.24).

The expression in 4.17 may perhaps correspond to the double road into justification hinted at in 3.30: When God brings a Gentile to faith, this is a creation out of nothing; the person had no previous covenant membership of any sort. 'Call' is, after all, a strange word to use of creation out of nothing, but 'call' is how Paul speaks of the summons of the good news (see, e.g., 9.24). When God brings a Jew to share Abraham's faith, on the other hand, this is life out of death, a renewal of covenant membership after the threat of being cut off (cf. 2.25-29; 11.11-16, esp. 11.15, on which see at 11.12-32).

Verses 16-17 form a striking and original argument that belongs recognizably within Second Temple Judaism but cuts across what we might expect. Paul's emphasis contrasts with that of Si 44.19-21:

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations,  
and no one has been found like him in glory.  
He kept the Torah of the Most High,  
and entered into a covenant with him;  
he certified the covenant in his flesh,  
and when he was tested he proved faithful.  
Therefore the Lord assured him with an oath  
that the nations would be blessed through his offspring;  
that he would make him as numerous as the dust of the earth,  
and exalt his offspring like the stars,  
and give them an inheritance from sea to sea  
and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth.

Here, Torah and circumcision are the central features, along with Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac (Gn 22, which is absent from Rm 4).<sup>20</sup> Sirach also highlights Abraham's faith(fulness): 'he was found faithful' (*heurethē pistos*, 44.20), but this does not have the sense of 'believ-

ing the promise' that Paul has drawn out. The two belong on the same map; but Paul's way of telling the story grows directly out of what he now believes about God because of the events concerning Jesus, which have resulted in the establishment of the promised Jew-plus-Gentile family with faith as its defining feature. Abraham's faith in 'God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were' is what Paul now analyzes, as he draws together the threads, not only of this chapter but of the whole first section (Rm 1-4) of his letter.

In mentioning that Abraham 'believed God who gives life to the dead, and calls those things that are not as though they were' (4.17), Paul is pointing out the specific *form* of Abraham's faith. It was not just a general religious belief, an awareness of 'the other', or of the 'mystery of life', nor was it simply a trust that 'things will all work out', or a belief that 'God is there for me'. It was, specifically, a trust in the *promise of a seed* that the true God had made; and if God were ever to fulfill them, he would thereby show that he was what Paul said in 4.17b: the life-giver, the creator out of nothing.

Paul's description of Abraham's faith in 4.17 seems to be designed with two things in mind. In 4.18-22 he demonstrates that when Abraham believed God's promise, he was exemplifying what it meant to be truly human, in contrast to the human disintegration in 1.18-3.20. And in 4.23-25, which conclude the chapter and the entire first section of the letter, he shows that this type of faith is the same as that which Christians demonstrate when believing that God raised Jesus from the dead. That is why Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles, who share Abraham's faith, also share his justification (Gn 15.6).

The theme of the unity and equality of believing Jews and believing Gentiles now fades from view. Paul concentrates instead on the nature of the faith that unites them, and on the certainty of the justification that follows. Are justification and faith then after all the main themes of Rm 4? Not at all. In 4.16, Paul finished the main argument that began with 4.1, and now in 4.17 returns to the overall argument not only of 3.21-4.25 but of the whole section (1.18-4.25). He is rounding off the entire section of which 3.21-4.25 was the second main part. He therefore widens the horizon, to speak more directly of the true God, the nature of faith in the true God, and how this faith is the hallmark of genuine humanness as opposed to the corrupt variety.

**4.18-19.** Paul returns to Gn 15, this time to the verse that precedes his key phrase: God showed Abraham the stars, and declared, 'So shall your seed be' (Gn 15.5). This was the promise that Abraham believed. Paul has linked

<sup>20</sup> Some have cited Gn 22.17-18 as a parallel to 4.13, but the verse is equally explicable in reference to Gn 12.3; 18.18; in other words, there is nothing specific to Gn 22. A more likely reference to that chapter is found in Rm 8.32 (see below).



this with the quotation from Gn 17.5 already referred to in 4.17, 'I have made you the father of many nations'; he assumes that offspring like the stars of heaven and many nations amount to the same thing. Abraham believed this promise, he says, 'hoping against hope'. He faced the fact of his own physical condition,<sup>21</sup> and that of Sarah, without any weakening in faith. Paul draws a veil over the various episodes such as Abraham's passing Sarah off as his sister (Gn 12.10-20 and esp 20.1-18, which occurred between the promise of Isaac, 18.1-15, and his birth, 21.1-7); and the matter of Hagar and Ishmael (Gn 16.1-16). The feature of this faith to which Paul draws attention is its persistence in hoping for new life when Abraham's and Sarah's bodies were as good as dead because of their age. This builds on 4.17 and looks directly forward to 4.24-25.

**b. The stance of the true humanity before God (compare 1.18-32) 4.19-22**

Handout

## Abraham's Faith, Antidote to Adam's Disobedience and Stance of the True Humanity Before God (and St Paul's Discussion of Homosexuality in Romans 1.26-27)

A large part of the long argument with which St Paul's letter to the Romans opens (1.18-4.25) depends on the assumption that when God blessed *Abraham*, he had in mind to restore what *Adam* had lost. That's why his blessing to Abraham—

'I will multiply you exceedingly... you will be a father of many nations... I will make you exceedingly fruitful' (Gn 17.1-17)

—evokes his original blessing to Adam:

'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth...' (Gn 1.28).

Paul is not arguing this point; he just assumes it. For his part, he wants to show how God has brought about a single covenant family composed of both Jews and Gentiles, in faithfulness to his promise to Abraham and, in doing so, is restoring his creation to its intended perfection (cf 8.18-23).

Paul begins by describing the problem of Adamkind: Human beings have turned away from the true God to worship idols, and God has handed them over to the dishonor, unfruitfulness and corruption that they pursued (1.18-32). This is not at all an argument about individuals, even though, in our individualistic culture, we 'naturally' assume it is; Paul's point is really about Adam, as his language suggests (see esp 1.23). It is certainly not the case, for example, that anyone who is gay (1.26-27) is an idolater (1.23) 'worthy of death' (1.32). In these preliminary remarks Paul is moving toward an assertion that *all* find themselves in the dock with no excuse before God, the just judge (2.1-11), for '*all* fell short,<sup>22</sup> and lack God's glory' (3.23).

But why would Paul, who doesn't talk about sex much at all, single out same-sex practices, rather than, say, murder or torture— or even adultery, which is far more common, and which also receives the sentence of death in Lv 20.10,13?

If we read Rm 1-4 as a whole, we discover that in 1.18-32, Paul is setting up the first part of a contrast with Abraham's faith that will emerge only when he gets to 4.16-22. We will also find that, despite having the Torah— God's own Law— Israel too has fallen into adultery (2.17-3.20, esp 2.22; 7.3; cf eg Jr 3.8). The Torah exposes sin in *Israel itself*, and brings condemnation, not vindication (3.20, 4.15, 5.20) even to those who boast that God gave them his Torah! (2.17-20).

The purpose of the Torah was to make Israel the light of the world (2.17-20). But Israel consistently failed to be this, as indeed the Torah and the Prophets show; so Torah is no *basis* for the promised restoration, or for the reintegration of the human race into the single covenant people, fulfilling God's promise to give Abraham a universal covenant family. Paul is arguing that in fact the sign of Abraham's covenant membership was not circumcision (4.2-3,9-11; cf Gn 17.11), but *faith* (Gn 15.6) in the 'God who gives life to the dead, and calls the things that are not, as though they were' (4.17). Circumcision was a *seal*, but not a *basis*, of the covenant membership Abraham already enjoyed through faith (4.11). As for the Torah— it was for wisdom (2.17-20), but in reality it

<sup>21</sup> Some puzzled early scribes wrote that Abraham 'did *not* consider' his physical condition. But Paul's point is not that Abraham ignored it, but that he took it fully into account, and still believed and hoped anyway.

<sup>22</sup> *Ēmarton*, an archery term meaning to 'miss the mark'; usually translated 'sinned'.

brought about 'recognition of sin' (3.20) and calls forth wrath from God (4.15), not honor.

When God began his program of restoring Adam (Gn 12.1), but what he sought in his covenant partner was *faithfulness*<sup>23</sup> (3.19-23; cf Gn 15.6, 17.1). So in 4.17-21, Paul contrasts Abraham's *faithfulness* with the condition of Adamkind that he described at the beginning of his argument (1.18-32):

Adamkind			Abraham
Humans practiced idolatry and unrighteousness	1.18	4.22	Abraham's faith 'reckoned to him for righteousness.'
Humans ignored God the creator and worshipped created things	1.20,25	4.17-18	Abraham believed in God the life-giver and creator
Human bodies dishonored	1.24	4.19	Abraham's body as good as dead
passions of dishonor <sup>24</sup> among both women and men	1.26	4.19	Extreme old age of both Abraham and Sarah
Humans did not glorify God as God	1.21	4.20	Abraham gave glory to God
Humans knew about God's power; did not worship	1.20,28	4.21	Abraham recognized God's power
Females and males turn to non-procreative sex	1.26-27	4.18	God promises Abraham and Sarah a family of many nations.

Abraham, of course, is an example. We must have his faith, that we might be numbered, with Isaac, among the 'seed' of which he is the father (4.12,16,24). This is the seed that would obtain, indeed, the whole *kosmos* as its inheritance (4.13). But Abraham is not *just* an *example*. God's response to Abraham's trust was to give him *Isaac*, that is, the person who would carry God's messianic, world-redeeming program forward.

For God's way of dealing with the problems Paul mentioned in 1.18-32 was to give him an *heir* in the long and unique story at whose end he would send his own Son as Israel's Anointed, 'marked out... in power... by the resurrection of the dead' (1.3-4). So faith— Abraham's faith in 'the God who gives life to the dead, and calls the

things that are not, as though they were' (4.17), and our similar faith in the same God 'who raised Jesus from the dead' (4.24)— is the sign that we are in the covenant people in whom the blessing of Adam is restored. In sharing Abraham's faith, we connect with a history, not with a 'spiritual principle' of some kind. Our own restoration takes place within that history, which has many twists and turns, and involves sinners as well as saints.

One effect of seeing the *structure* of Paul's argument, though, as shown in the chart above, is that Paul's comments about same-sex behavior (1.26-27) finally come into focus. Paul is not, out of the blue and without explanation, singling out homosexuality as an exceptionally terrible sin that merits God's wrath more than all other sins he could name. Rm 1.26-27 is simply part of an opening salvo of a much larger argument which, among other things, contrasts Adamic idolatry with Abraham's faithfulness. In this context, Paul mentions *unfruitful* pagan sexual practices (1.26-27) because God revealed his saving justice by granting *fruitfulness* to Abraham and Sarah. But their fruitfulness was not itself the point; it was just the means to the point, which was the granting of an *heir* to Abraham, in view of the promise that he would be the father of many nations (4.16; cf Gn 12.3; 17.4-5).

Paul points to same-sex behavior only as an example— as convenient as it is obvious— of the passions of fallen Adamkind. Whatever else we may say about homosexuality, it is not procreative, and in a world of high mortality where having children was critical for survival, the unfruitfulness of such relations, as well as social opprobrium— not Aids, which didn't exist in Paul's day— was the 'recompense' (*anti-misthian*) Paul is getting at when he speaks of 'men doing what is inappropriate with men, and receiving in themselves the due recompense of their error' (1.27). Abraham's 'compensation' (*misthos*), by contrast, was not only an heir, but ultimately the Messiah, who would rule the world in justice.

Paul's overall points are thus the following:

'All sinned, and come short of God's glory' (3.23); all have turned away from the true God to idols, and all have been given over to various 'passions of dishonor' (1.26) and different forms of unfruitfulness;

God called Abraham to be the one through whose seed he would restore the blessing that Adam lost (4.1-25; cf Gn 17);

Abraham responded in faith, and God ganted him an heir, promising that his seed (family) would obtain the promised inheritance (Gn 15.1-5);

<sup>23</sup> *Pistis*, in Greek. Usually this is translated 'faith', but most of the time 'faithfulness' or 'trust' seem to get closer the point being made.

<sup>24</sup> *Pathē atimias*. KJV has 'vile affections'; others, 'vile passions' or the like. A 'passion' (*pathos*) is something endured or suffered, over which one has no control.

Abraham trusted 'God who gives life to the dead, and calls the things that are not, as though they were' (4.17), and was reckoned righteous; those who likewise 'believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead' (4.24) are also reckoned as belonging to God's covenant family.

Paul did believe that same-sex practices dishonor the body, which God intended to be fruitful. Any attempts to get him to say something else are simply foolish. He calls it a 'passion of dishonor'— but the very meaning of 'passion' (*pathos*) is that it is something endured or experienced, or even suffered; that is, part of the human condition, like Abraham and Sarah's extreme old age. And though Israel committed adultery (2.22; 7.3; cf Jr 3.8), neither God nor Paul sought her destruction (Lv 20.10,13).

Faith was Abraham's response to *grace* (4.2,4,16, corresponding to 3.24), the grace that had called him and addressed him with life-giving promises in the first place. Abraham's faith 'in God who gives life to the dead, and calls those things that are not as though they were' (4.17) was 'reckoned as righteousness' because his sort of faith, evoked by sheer grace, is evidence of a human life back on track, turned from idolatry to true worship, and from corruption to fruitfulness. Likewise, our faith in 'him who raised Jesus from the dead' (4.24) is the *sign* of life; life is the gift of God.

**Justification is God's declaration that where this sign of life appears, the person in whom it appears is *within the covenant*.**

Faith is the response God seeks from us, but his own are the ways he will bring about his aims, as he recompenses our faith in him.

This meditation relies heavily on NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*. New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume X (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2002), pp 499-502. See also E Adams, 'Abraham's Faith and Gentile Disobedience: Textual Links Between Romans 1 and 4', *JSNT* 65 (1997) 47-66.

The stress on Abraham's faith/faithfulness also contrasts powerfully with the faithless Israel described in 2.17–3.20, notably at 3.3. Abraham was given grace to be in faithful covenant relation with the true God and thereby to embody and exhibit, initially in his faith and subsequently in his fruitfulness, the marks of genuine humanity. The thrust of 4.20-21 is the God-centeredness and God-honoringness of Abraham's faith, worshipping and relying totally on the faithful, life-giving creator God. This stands in close relation to what Paul had said in 3.21-22, where God's covenant faithfulness is unveiled for the

benefit of those who believe. The thrust of 1.18-32 is the self-centeredness and idolatrousness of Adamic rebellion, worshipping the dead images of false gods.

**c. Our faith in him who raised Jesus from the dead 4.23-25**

Abraham's faith was 'therefore reckoned to him unto righteousness' (4.22). Was Abraham's faith so special, so virtuous, so remarkable, that he was *rewarded* by having it 'reckoned as righteousness'? Is he then the one conspicuous exception, prior to Jesus the Messiah, to the general rule laid down in 1.18–3.20, that 'none is righteous, no not one'? Why, if so, did the full redemption have to wait for two thousand more years? Why did it not happen then and there, with Abraham himself?

Paul does not address these questions, which arise for us when we determine to give Abraham his full place in Pauline theology rather than being shunted into a siding as a mere polemically useful 'example'. But it is clear that Paul did *not* think Abraham's faith was something to boast about.

Faith was Abraham's response to *grace* (4.2,4,16, corresponding to 3.24), the grace that had called him and addressed him with life-giving promises in the first place. Abraham's faith 'in God who gives life to the dead, and calls those things that are not as though they were' (4.17) was 'reckoned as righteousness' because his sort of faith, evoked by sheer grace, is evidence of a human life back on track, turned from idolatry to true worship, and from corruption to fruitfulness. Likewise, our faith in 'him who raised Jesus from the dead' (4.24) is the *sign* of life; life is the gift of God.

*Justification is God's declaration that where this sign of life appears, the person in whom it appears is within the covenant.*

**c. For us, who trust him who raised Jesus from the dead 4.23-25**

Paul needs to do only one more thing before he completes the first section of his letter (1.18–4.25): he needs to put his audience on the map. He has not spoken about 'us' (i.e. himself and his audience) since 1.5-15; the debating partner of his 'diatribe' starting at 2.1 was purely hypothetical. But from here on, 'we', and 'our' status before God will be major themes for the next four chapters. This is a vital clue to the relation between chaps. 1–4 and 5–8, to the transition between them, and to how both sections together lay the foundation for the second half of the letter, which contains the more particular things Paul wants to say to the Roman church.

As often, Paul declares that a biblical passage had, in God's intention, a wider meaning than simply its histori-

cal reference.<sup>25</sup> Because he reads scripture covenantally, he insists that God's reckoning Abraham faith as justifying him applies to all who share Abraham's faith (4.23)—which, not surprisingly, granted the full explanation of this faith in 4.17-21, is seen as faith in God the life-giver, who raised Jesus from the dead (4.24). Abraham's faith was evoked by the word that spoke to him of his great family, even though he was as good as dead; Christian faith is called forth by the word of the good news, which speaks of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (1.4) and the disclosure thereby that he was and is Israel's Messiah, the Lord of the world, even though we too are still subject to our passions.

'Faith', for Paul, is never vague, but always defined in relation to the God in whom trust is placed, as 4.16-22 makes clear. Christian faith is specifically 'believing in the God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead' (4.24). *For Paul, God, not Jesus, is the primary object of Christian faith.* The description of God 'who raised Jesus' is echoed at 8.11, another key point in Paul's argument; for Paul it is axiomatic that the resurrection took place by God's initiative and power,<sup>26</sup> so that the meaning of the event is the meaning God intends (1.4), namely, that Jesus is thereby marked out as God's Son, the Messiah, Israel's representative, the one in whom God's promises of redemption have finally come true. Confessing that Jesus is Lord, therefore, and that God raised him from the dead (10.9), means sharing Abraham's faith; and that faith, as Paul has now argued, is the one and only sign of membership in Abraham's family. Paul does not spell out the implication in this passage, but the rest of the chapter, along with 3.27-30, should still be echoing in the mind. Because there is only one badge of membership, all who share this faith are members of God's redeemed and forgiven people, no matter what their ancestry. Paul is not making a substantially new point at this stage in the chapter. He has mapped out the Abrahamic family created when God unveiled his righteousness in Jesus the Messiah—the family in which the distinction between Jew and Gentile, maintained by Torah in particular, is set aside once for all, the family whose sole identifying badge is Christian faith.

Remarkably enough, 4.25 is the first mention of Jesus' resurrection since the programmatic and formulaic 1.4,<sup>27</sup>

even though the rest of the argument would be incomprehensible without it. (Paul often reveals at the very conclusion of an argument something that has been foundational to it all along.) Thousands of other young Jews were crucified by the Roman authorities in the first century, including several would-be Messiahs. What distinguishes Jesus is obviously the resurrection. It is what gives meaning to the crucifixion, and enables Paul to say, by way of a closing christological summary (this, too, anticipates the careful writing of Rm 5-8), that Jesus was 'given up because of our trespasses and raised because of our justification' (4.25).<sup>28</sup>

The point of 4.24, then, is that those who believe the good news of Jesus, which involves believing in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, share Abraham's faith, and will, like him, be reckoned 'righteous' in the senses already outlined. Paul has now shown how the bald assertions of 3.27-30 are grounded in the original covenant and promise, and when he says 'we reckon', 'we figure' (*logizometha*) at 3.28, it's clear that he's referring not so much to the argument he had already sketched in 3.21-26 as to picture he has drawn Rm 4 in all its fullness. Having stated in 3.28 the result of the calculation, he has shown his work in Rm 4.

All this has been accomplished, of course, through Jesus himself. Jesus 'was given up for our transgressions and raised for our justification'.<sup>29</sup> This was where God's righteousness, God's covenant faithfulness, God's saving justice, was displayed. This sums up exactly what Paul has been saying, under the general heading of 1.3-4, throughout the letter so far. He has spent the best part of three chapters demonstrating that all human beings were 'under the power of sin' (3.9); very well, Jesus was 'given up because of our trespasses' (3.24-26, in other words, answers exactly to the problem of 1.18-3.20.) Paul has spent the last thirty or so verses arguing that because of the unveiling of God's righteousness in Jesus the Messiah, all who believe are justified; very well, Jesus 'was raised for our justification'. This is another way of saying that the life-giving God, in whom Abraham believed and was justified, gave life to Jesus, in whom we believe and are justified. This much is at once clear. But there are other questions lurking beneath the surface.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., 1Co 9.9-10; 10.11; and above all Rm 15.4, on which see at 15.1-13.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., 10.9; 1Co 6.14; 15.15; 2Co 4.14; 13.4; Ga 1.1. 2Co 4.14 is very close to the present phrase (4.24) and to 8.11.

<sup>27</sup> It is also only the tenth time—and this is the 116th verse—of the letter!—that the name 'Jesus' has occurred in Rm (1.1, 4, 6, 7, 8; 2.16; 3.22, 24, 26; and now this passage) and only the fifth in the 99 verses since the introduction. Without Jesus, there would be nothing to say; this alerts us to how Paul doesn't always put the most important parts

of the logical structure or his thought into the actual rhetorical flow of his letters.

<sup>28</sup> For the resurrection as giving meaning to the cross, see 1Co 15.17-18.

<sup>29</sup> This and 5.18 are the only two occurrences of the term 'justification' (*δικαίωσις dikaiōsis*) in the NT—surprisingly, granted its use as a technical term in Christian theology and the regular appeal made to Paul, and Romans in particular, on the topic. It is rare in classical Greek; in the LXX only at Lev 24.22; in Symmachus, at Ps 34(35).1.23.

To begin with, Paul seems to be quoting, or at least deliberately alluding to, Isa 53.5,12 (see at 3.24-26; see also at 5.18-19).<sup>30</sup> Isaiah 40–55 is one of the central scriptural passages in which the creator God’s righteousness is said to be revealed, both to confound the pagan nations and their gods and to rescue wayward Israel from sin and exile, and in which this task is accomplished supremely through the death and resurrection of ‘the servant of the Lord’. In view of the large themes that tie Romans and the central section of Isaiah together, it’s clear that when Paul alludes to one central verse in this passage in Isaiah he intends a reference to the whole. Just as 4.25 expresses for the first time the theological point that turns out to have been foundational for the whole preceding passage, so Isaiah 40–55 has been implicit throughout as well.

The death of Jesus has been mentioned so far only in 3.22-26 (taking references to Jesus’ ‘faithfulness’ to include a reference to his death), but it has remained basic to the whole theology of justification, and of the non-ethnic covenant family, which Paul has expounded from 3.27 through to 4.24. The cross is central also to the whole argument of Ga 2.11–4.11, with its exposition of Abraham’s single family, justified by faith (see also Ep 2.11-22). This prepares us for the repeated emphasis on Jesus’ death in Rm 5–8, where Paul will be drawing out what is latent in the present section.

But what, more precisely, does the present verse say about the meaning and effect of Jesus’ death and resurrection? He was handed over, says Paul, ‘because of’ our trespasses and was raised up ‘because of’ our justification (*dia* plus the accusative (as here), indicates the reason why something happens, or ‘on account of which’ something occurs).

The first half of the verse is fairly clear. ‘Our trespasses’ were the reason or cause for Jesus’ ‘handing over’; as in Isaiah, he was so identified with ‘us’ that he suffered the fate we deserved. What then of the second half of the verse?

The Suffering Servant in Isaiah is raised to new life after his vicarious death (Isa 53.10b-12); his task then, as God’s righteous one, is ‘to make many righteous’ (4.11, alluded to in Rm 5.18-19). Carrying this meaning into Rm 4, as the allusion invites us to do, would suggest that Jesus’ resurrection took place ‘because of our justification’, that is, ‘because God intended thereby to justify us’.

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<sup>30</sup> In particular, the strange expression ‘he was given up’ or ‘he was handed over’ (*paredôthē*), not the most natural word to use for the death of Jesus, is the word used in Isa 53.5 and twice in 53.12. These verses in Isaiah use the word *hamartia* for ‘sin’, rather than *paraptoma*; lit., ‘transgression’ as here.

This is supported by the one previous mention of the resurrection in the letter: God marked out Jesus as his Son by the resurrection (1.4). The resurrection unveiled to the surprised world, Israel included, the age-old saving plan of the creator God. In particular it declared, as in a law-court, that God had vindicated Jesus, shown him to be in the right. His life and death were the true faithfulness for which God had created Israel in the first place. Thus, if faithful Jesus is demonstrated to be Messiah by the resurrection, the resurrection also declares in principle that all those who belong to Jesus, all those who respond in faith to God’s faithfulness revealed in him, are themselves part of the true covenant family promised to Abraham. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus is our declaration of justification.

Rm 4 thus leads us to a high rock looking back over the landscape we have covered. From the same vantage point, looking ahead, we can glimpse the route we are now to take.

First, the view backward. The events concerning Jesus the Messiah, and the good news in which these events are announced, unveil the covenant faithfulness, the saving justice, of the creator God, because in these events he has at last accomplished the promises he made to Abraham. These promises were designed to redeem the world, by creating a worldwide family in whom the grim entail of human sin and its consequences (present corruption, future wrath) would be dealt with. This has now been achieved through the sacrificial death and the resurrection of the Messiah, Jesus. Through Jesus’ faithfulness, God has fulfilled the purpose for which the people of Israel were called into being in the first place and marked out with circumcision and Torah. Torah, however, cannot be the boundary marker of covenant membership, since it inevitably points to Israel’s sin. God’s creation of the non-ethnic covenant family is therefore an act of supreme grace, modeled on how grace came to Abraham to begin with, bringing forgiveness of sins and present justification to all, Jew and Gentile alike, who believe in ‘the God who raised Jesus’.

Every line in this argument, every turn in the thought, will be vital for the specific points that Paul wants to make to the church in Rome in Rm 9–11 and 12–16. From our vantage point we can see the outline of these passages in the distance.

In 9–11, Paul wrestles with the problem of Jewish unbelief and tells again the story of Israel, from Abraham to the Messiah and on into the future. He explains how God has in fact been faithful to the promises and how, within that framework and without smuggling in favoritism by the back door, God has not written off the Jewish peo-

ple. The point of the section is found in chapter 11, where Paul warns the largely Gentile church in Rome not to despise the non-Christian Jews, who are still the objects of God's saving love and purposes.

Then, in 12–16, Paul sets out the parameters for the church to live as the renewed humanity within a pagan society. The key is again the unity, across traditional barriers, of all who believe in the God revealed in Jesus (14.1–15.13). The latter passage closes, dramatically, with the quotation of Isa 11.10, which speaks of the Messiah and his resurrection as the means by which the Gentiles will be brought under the rule of the God of Israel (Paul uses a version of Isaiah that makes this point more clearly than most translations of the prophet indicate). Paul thereby completes a huge circle with 1.3-5. The mission and unity of the church, grounded in a covenantal understanding of what the one true God accomplished in Jesus the Messiah, are the thrusts of the last two sections.

This is not the only view, however, that we gain from the end of chapter 4. As we saw when examining Paul's good news and the way it reveals God's justice, this message issues a challenge to the world in which Caesar ruled supreme, whose justice had rescued the world from chaos and had established a single empire embracing all nations. Paul is not ashamed of the good news of Jesus, because in it God's own saving justice, his covenant faithfulness, is revealed. The living God upstages Caesar.

What about the landscape in between our vantage point at the end of chap. 4 and the two great sections 9–11 and 12–16? How does Rm 5–8 grow out of 1–4 and pave the way for what is to follow? This is perhaps the central question about the thought structure of Romans.

### Reflections

1. The most important reflection to arise from Rm 4 is the non-negotiable task of persuading those who believe in Jesus as Messiah and Lord to see themselves as children of Abraham (and indeed of Sarah).

Abraham is not just an example of a biblical character who happened to be 'justified by faith'; he is, declares Paul, 'the father of us all'. The Pauline picture of the people of God is inescapably rooted in the history of Israel from Gn 12 onward.

The God revealed in Jesus the Messiah is the God of Abraham; the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus is the meaning those events have as the fulfillment of the promises made by this God. Christian living is characterized by faith in Abraham's God, by loyalty to the project of his God for creation, by the renewing, healing, and sanctifying power of the Spirit of that God (see Rm 8). Christians read the story of Abraham and

Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, and of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel as their own story, as an earlier act in the great drama that reached its climax in the Messiah, Jesus (cf. 9.4-5), and has now opened up to embrace the whole world. Paul struggled to persuade his Gentile converts to see themselves this way, rather than to imagine that they belonged to a new group (certainly not a new 'religion!') lately sprung up from nowhere. Largely Gentile churches in our own day need to engage in the same struggle.

2. Within the family given by God to Abraham, there is no room for subdefinitions. It is hard to live in community on the basis of nothing more nor less than belief in the God who raised Jesus. Humans naturally gravitate toward communities of similar background, personality, speech, or indeed social position or bank balance; Christians are no exception. Within Western society, particularly in urban areas, this leads to choosing one's Christian fellowship and church membership for reasons that Paul would have regarded as irrelevant, possibly damaging. The barrier between Jew and Gentile has been overcome in Jesus, and God has achieved the worldwide community promised originally to Abraham. There is no excuse for thinking that one's own culture is so deeply important, even important to the good news, that it must not be compromised by fellowship with others who do things differently.

3. Within this, Christians must embody in their church life the truth articulated in 4.4-8: the fact that the family promised by God to Abraham is a family of forgiven sinners, rescued by grace alone from the personal and communal disintegration that results from idolatry and sin. The God we worship is the God who justifies the ungodly, not the pious. The point at which we need to grow continually is in making real, to ourselves and one another, and particularly in the way we structure our corporate life, the fact that we believe in, and celebrate, the God who justifies the ungodly. Forgiveness remains one of the most astonishing gifts, and the church should be the place where people are regularly astonished by it.

4. Rm 4 urges us to examine how true faith reflects, and feeds on, the character of God, and how it leads to the rehabilitation of the true image-bearingness of human beings. Abraham's faith, analyzed in detail in 4.18-21, is focused on, and gains its character from, the true God at every turn. It looks fully at the human and worldly situation, filled as it is with death and decay; it acknowledges that this is the state we are in; and it also looks steadfastly at the God who raises the dead and creates out of nothing. Worshipping this God (4.20), and acknowledging that this God has the power to deliver on promises of new life in the place of death, is fundamental to Christian faith. It is also the reversal and undoing of that idol-

atry outlined in 1.18-25, and therefore cannot but issue in a life that undoes and reverses the consequent behavior spoken of in 1.26-31. Paul does not develop this further here, but those who want to live with the meaning of Rm 4 cannot avoid looking further, not just to chap. 6, but also to chap. 12, where he holds out a model of remade humanity in which the faith spoken of in chap. 4 has its full effect in transforming mind, character, and behavior.